COMING TO HOBOKEN

BY

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[Section 1] First Impressions

"Hoboken! You're moving to *Hoboken*?"

Our suburban neighbor was not merely incredulous. He seemed downright offended. The man had grown up in Hoboken, and when Curly and I said yes, we were looking for a house there, he stood up from his perpetual lawn trimming and stabbed the air in our direction with his garden shears. "Do you know how long I had to save," he shouted, "to get out of Hoboken?"

Our friends, once they realized we were serious, were more polite. But they too seemed to question our stability. Some of them commuted to New York, as we did, and knew Hoboken as the crotch of bistate transit, where residents of greener places transferred from their cars and trains and noxious diesel buses to the PATH tubes that ran beneath the Hudson River to Manhattan. Twice a day tens of thousands of us speed-walked through the Erie Lackawanna terminal, an impressive Beaux Arts structure that is now a national landmark. Today commuters stand in line for monthly tickets under a Tiffany stained-glass skylight that takes up a dazzling 2500 square feet of the stately waiting room's elaborately plastered ceiling. But then the skylight had been painted black since World War II, and anyway commuters on their lemming marches scarcely saw the building under decades of accumulated crud. What people did see as they approached the station were a grimy railroad yard, a potholed road, and across the road a stretch of dying factories and rubble-strewn vacant lots.

The first realtor we saw couldn't believe us either. "A house in Hoboken? Do you want it for investment purposes?" At that time, in the early 1970s, almost every rowhouse block we walked contained at least one building with the door and windows boarded up. Some blocks seemed half deserted. More people had been moving out than in for half a century, and most newcomers were still immigrants—or, by then, islanders from Puerto

Rico—who saw Hoboken's cheap flats as the first step on their way up and into the real America. To make the return trip from grassy Republican suburbia seemed nuts.

Our future neighbors weren't encouraging. The women in dusters who stood watch on their stoops took sour pleasure in informing us that Hoboken, once a lovely town, had been "going down" for decades, and that we newcomers were mistaken if we thought we could reverse the slide by planting trees or restoring crumbling facades.

"We had trees once, all up and down the street," a hefty fiftyish bleached blond in fat pink hair curlers told us as we peered past a "for sale" sign at the patched cement and peeling paint next door. "But right behind the trees came dogs and caterpillars, swahms and swahms of caterpillars. Ugh, it was awful! So the neighbors all went in together and got rid of the trees. No, no one wanted to keep them. Now you say the city's giving out free trees again? It won't work, wait and see. *They'll* just come and swing on the branches, snap them right off." It wasn't clear from the rest of her diatribe whether "they" were children in general, Puerto Ricans ("that element"), or the dogs and caterpillars of the infested past.

None of this deterred us. Having lived at nine addresses in five states during eighteen years of marriage, we took a perverse pride in settling in a place the natives had given up on and the rest of the world knew chiefly as a one-word joke.

Of course that wasn't why we moved, or not entirely. We were both tired of commuting on the weary Erie railroad, with its un-air-conditioned cars and unexplained long stops on the way home that last hot summer. But rush-hour driving to New York was not an option, especially for me. I drove before we moved; I had to; but I have always feared and hated cars for all the different kinds of damage they're to blame for. So when I found a square-mile city where I could get around on foot or hop a PATH train for Manhattan, I was home free.

As for Curly, it was Hoboken's wall-to-wall waterfront bars that first lured him out of the station. He had finished up his engineering degree at Cooper Union night school in Manhattan; and on his way home he often waited for his train, and sometimes missed a few, in the old saloons along what sailors and longshoremen knew for generations as Hoboken's Barbary Coast. "If I were a writer," Curly used to say, "I'd

write a novel about the tough old dames who run those waterfront bars. I'd call it 'Harpies of the Shore.'" He wasn't a writer; he just liked the phrase, had kept it in his head since memorizing Oliver Wendell Holmes' "Old Ironsides" in high school. And he was through with school some years before we thought of moving here. But he wasn't through with bars. And though the Barbary Coast establishments had since been torn down for a drab highrise development, Hoboken was still a bar town. Life would be simpler, Curly felt, if he could just walk home after knocking down a few.

The idea probably struck him in the sixties, when we read in *The New York Times* of artists moving to Hoboken's cheap cold-water flats above the Barbary Coast dives. We weren't artists, any more than Curly was a writer, and we were surely not inclined to live without hot water over sad saloons. But a few years later when *The Times* ran a feature on home buyers discovering the square-mile city's cheap Victorian brownstones, I agreed to take a look.

To be fair, it wasn't just the beer that Curly found alluring. The river had a pull on both of us. We had both grown up in gritty river cities, he on Detroit's East Side where, he said, the kids really did say, "Let's go down to the river and slug rats"; I in Sault Ste. Marie in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a thousand miles from Hoboken and so many miles from anywhere that the U.S. Congress long refused to fund a canal there because, said early nineteenth-century Congress member Henry Clay, it was a place beyond the moon. But it wasn't too remote to be polluted. On the banks of the St. Mary's River, near where Chippewa and voyageurs once shot the rapids in birchbark canoes, a Union Carbide plant spewed soot that kept our snow a dusty black from first fall to slushy spring. Fumes from another river-powered industry, a leather tannery, would periodically flood the air with a revolting stench.

Still, I remember waking up to the river: sitting up in bed to watch the ore boats gliding past between a narrow park on our side and our twin city, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, across. As children my sister and I tobogganed in that park and cartwheeled through the rainbow-colored spray of a fountain near the famed Soo locks. I learned my alphabet, or some of it, from the long ships' smokestacks—to this day "H" stands not for "hello" or "house" or "hand" but for the Hutchinson line—and at night I fell asleep to the comforting low moo of foghorns and ships' whistles signaling for passage through the

locks.

By the time we started looking in Hoboken, its industrial waterfront was fast becoming history. For a hundred years or so the city's mile-long stretch of shipyards, piers, and drydocks had employed skilled craftsmen in shipbuilding and repair and kept unskilled workers by the tens of thousands busy loading and unloading cargo. During both world wars the shipyards operated round the clock, and millions of our country's troops embarked for Europe from Hoboken piers. (Hence General Pershing's famous promise to his troops in World War I that they would be in "Heaven, Hell or Hoboken by Christmas.") In peacetime, immigrants from Europe had got off the boat in Hoboken, and tourists bound for Europe boarded luxury liners from the same docks. It was from Hoboken that President Wilson set off with his Fourteen Points to forge the Peace of Paris.

But now, we knew, the liners and the cargo ships were gone. The only motor humming round the clock belonged to Maxwell House, and that was not a sign of shift work. Since the thirties Maxwell House had processed coffee in a complex of art deco buildings just above Eleventh Street; and its landmark neon sign still beamed across the Hudson, a giant glowing cup forever tipped and spilling out that Good Last Drop. In fact we would be waking up to smell that roasting coffee for another twenty years or so, but even in the seventies the work at Maxwell House was winding down.

Still, it wasn't jobs that we had come for, and the river wasn't going anywhere. We could fancy living nicely in a brownstone like those featured in the paper. And I can't pretend the artists that we read of didn't give the grime an aura of bohemian allure. As it turned out it was one of those artists, a droll and witty storyteller who would come to captivate the whole Fretz family, who pretty much clinched my decision.

I was working then as juvenile editor of *Kirkus Reviews*, a subscription book review read mostly by librarians. My title notwithstanding I was essentially a drone, charged with writing short reviews of hundreds of new children's books each year. It was an okay job. It suited me to sound off with my reactions to the books. But there were so many of them, and so many of the many were so dull and flat and simpy, that I started having nightmares about floods and landslides made of gooey stuff called namby-pamby

pap. It was coming at me fast, with elves and fairies somehow prancing on the waves. (I'm not making this up.) But among the new works that caught my fancy were some doodle-y little picture books and offbeat but empathic stories by a new guy with the unlikely name of Manus Pinkwater. (For his readers who might wonder at the given name, let it be said that he'd soon change it to Daniel in compliance with a self-described "non-religion" called Subud.) So when I read on one book jacket that he lived in Hoboken, I broke a self-made rule against kid-lit hobnobbing and made a point of going to a meet-the-authors party thrown by his publisher.

It was easy to spot Manus in the crowd. He was standing in the center of the room and he must have weighed at least 300 pounds. His wife Jill was beside him—she had a teenage cookbook in the works with the same publisher—and she was fairly hefty too, though nowhere near his order of magnitude. I still remember walking through the door, still see the two of them, and only them, in bright relief, while the other authors and reviewers and the people hosting the event fade into drab clusters round the edges of the room.

I picked up a glass of wine and headed for the Pinkwaters. When I told them I'd come expressly to meet them and get their take on Hoboken, I saw them light up to their favorite subject. Their editor edged away unnoticed and the three of us stood, wine glasses in hand, while the party waxed and waned around us and Manus sounded forth on the exasperating urban village that had provided so much grist for his wiggy anecdotes and children's fantasies. Now and then Jill interrupted him, or he her. At one point he clapped a hand over her mouth, determined that he'd be the one to tell the story his way. She seemed to accept that.

I suspect that Manus had been honing his Hoboken stories since the late sixties, when he first crossed the river from Manhattan to create prints and sculpture in a sixty dollar loft above a Hudson Street saloon. But by the time I met him he had given up the fine arts to do children's books, and he was living in his own loft building, purchased with some kind of relocation grant he came by when the Barbary strip was bulldozed. Yet he still told stories of that first cheap space and all the wild musicians who came with the neighborhood. Days, he said, he could look out across a littered courtyard at a bunch of hippie squatters, mostly rock musicians, tending marijuana plants in their rear windows.

Nights, another bunch, a no-talent rock band, played all night at top volume in the saloon downstairs.

I have only a dim memory now of his descriptions of the characters he claimed as neighbors near his new space. I think one sold mail-order weapons. Another, if I've got it right, trapped cockroaches to feed his pet tarantula. It's the drinking water, Manus said at one point, that made these people so eccentric, out of step, unruly. "What Hoboken needs," he added later, "is for every resident to spend a year, or two years, somewhere else. Anywhere else." Of course, if that ever happened Hoboken would no longer be the place he mined so gleefully for stories.

Jill told about her dealings with a shifty plumber. "Trust me," he kept saying. "I knew your father." (Jill grew up, I believe, on Long Island.) And she told of going to the Board of Ed to ask about a teaching job. The Hoboken schools were then so desperate for special reading teachers they were hiring applicants without credentials, and Jill had an NYU master's degree in the subject. But the woman at the front desk screened her out with just one question: "Who sent you?"

"No one sent me," Jill said. End of story. She filled out an application on the spot, but without a godfather in the system she was never called in for an interview. It seems they didn't know her father after all.

I could have stood and listened for another hour, but the crowd had thinned and now the bartender was packing up. "See for yourself," Manus called as I was leaving. "Come over with your husband Saturday. We'll give you a tour."

So that Saturday Curly and I rang the bell to the Pinkwaters' third-floor loft in their five-story building just across the street from the PATH entrance. It was a great, expansive space, and they couldn't have been closer to Manhattan without getting wet. I learned later that the New York art critic Hilton Kramer had been a tenant in the building in the early sixties. Who knows how Manus's career might have developed had they overlapped? As it was, he and Jill rented out three floor-through lofts to artist friends and kept the street floor for their own dog training business.

Their own dog could have used more lessons. When we went through their apartment door that first time I was all but knocked back down the stairs by what both owners insisted was a friendly greeting from a huge Alaskan malamute named Arnold.

My legs were scratched and my skirt ripped, but no one seemed to think much of it. So I went on in and met a second malamute and Jill's two cats.

While I took in the bare-brick walls and wicker furniture and lush green hanging house plants overhead, a tenant, Don Yee, came to the door and Manus asked him in to say hello. "You'll be reading about him pretty soon in *Wingman*," Manus said, and he read us some bits from his completed manuscript. The book begins with the boy Donald (Ah-Wing at home) escaping his miseries at school by playing hooky to read comics high in the girders of the George Washington Bridge. "All true," said Manus. (The fantasy, of flying over China with a Chinese superhero, would come later.) Don didn't say much but confirmed that it was his story. In fact, though this wasn't in the book, Manus told us that Don had paid his way through college by mortgaging his outstanding comic book collection.

When Don left, Manus took us to his car, a converted checker cab he seemed quite proud of. He drove us up and down the nearby avenues—Hudson, Bloomfield, Garden, Park, the only ones deemed worth buying on back then —while Jill warned us off the numbered cross streets (small houses, no back yards), cautioned against fake brick facades (they could be covering frame firetraps, she said), and pointed out the raucous corner bars we wouldn't want for neighbors.

"And now," said Manus, "I'll show you the most beautiful art in Hoboken." We drove way uptown, past the old Tootsie Roll factory, now a warehouse where Macy's artists worked all year creating the balloons and floats for the store's Thanksgiving Day parade. But that wasn't the art that Manus had in mind. From there he swung a little south and west and stopped the car outside the factory yard at Ferguson Propeller works. There we sat a while just gazing at the huge new ships' propellers gleaming in the sun, as graceful and sublime as anything in MOMA's sculpture garden.

There was one more attraction to check out. The Pinkwaters' drove everywhere—I suppose he needed wheels to drag that weight around—but when we left them near the station the two of us decided to walk north along the waterfront to see if we could get down to the river.

The notion seemed to shock a white-haired woman we helped over to a bus with

all her shopping bags. “It’s worth your life to go down there after dark. Broken beer bottles everywhere!” But then that same woman, when I asked for conversation’s sake if she’d been shopping in New York, said “Ooh, I never go there. I was almost mugged once in New York, right near the Ninth Street tubes stop.” Anyway it was then well before dark, so we took her cue to stop for cold beer at a package store and started off up River Street.

There were sidewalks on the first four blocks but no pedestrians in sight. The old bars and tenements that had at least brought people to the street were gone, the Marineview towers weren’t yet open, and the parking structures, I think, yet to come. (Not that they would add much life to River Street.) “Right about there is where I used to fuel up for the train ride home,” said Curly, pointing, but all I saw was a weed-grown vacant lot. Across the street, on the river side, the Port Authority shipping piers I knew from *On the Waterfront* still sat behind their tall black iron fence. There was the shapeup yard where dockers fought for chits to work…the floating shack where Johnny Friendly barked his orders…the enormous shed where Marlon Brando’s Terry led the men to work in the finale—and where real longshoremen had done real work for generations. But now the whole facility was still as ghosts.

What had happened here in twenty years?

“One word, containerization,” Curly explained. Around 1960 the industry had started packing cargo in huge steel boxes that machines could lift from ship to truck or back the other way. This cut down on pilferage and labor costs, but both the boxes and the trucks required so much storage and maneuvering space that Hoboken’s piers were rendered obsolete.

But now it seemed another mob controlled the docks. While we stood looking through the fence a pack of ornery and unkempt dogs came snarling, barking, jumping up on the black iron bars. Curly said they were not Port Authority guard dogs, though they might as well be, but feral dogs who lived out on a pier. In any case there’d be no getting to the water here. So we kept going, in hopes of gaps or breaches further on.

We swerved east with River Road at Fourth Street where the sidewalk ended, so when a car went by we had to sidestep onto narrow strips of weed and rubble that ran sometimes on one side of the road, sometimes on the other. But pretty soon a snatch of

Latin music and a whiff of roasting meat came wafting from an old abandoned dock site. The spot was no Caribbean beach, but as we came near we saw a dozen or so transplanted islanders who seemed content to make do. Men who must have grown up near cleaner waters fished from a decaying wooden pier. Two couples danced to scratchy radio on crumbling concrete decking near the water's edge. And on a ring of lawn chairs near the road a family that looked well fed already attacked grilled sausages and beer and soda with appetites you'd think they'd worked up battling the surf.

While we stood looking for a way in, two guys with sixpacks who'd been working on their cars showed us where to duck through gaps someone had cut in the old wire fencing. From there we easily stepped over rotted railroad ties and rusty spikes and, sure, broken beer bottles, to uncap our own beer bottles on the rocks that jutted from the river.

So when we saw a realtor's office on our way back near the station, we didn't have to talk it over, just turned in. Which is how we wound up talking to the guy who took us for potential slumlords.

"A house in Hoboken? You want it for investment purposes?"

"No," I said. "To live in."

He didn't seem to get it, so Curly added: "We're interested in moving to Hoboken."

The realtor, a paunchy and slow-moving guy in sour middle age, shook his head and said with a great show of scorn, "You must have been reading the *New York Times*." He finally told us he would call if anything came up, but I was not surprised when nothing did.

Still, Hoboken kept turning up. In a doctor's waiting room I picked up a *New Jersey* magazine and found a piece by Don Singleton, a *Daily News* reporter who had bought a brownstone there a few years earlier. He and his wife Maureen were so happy with their new urban-village lifestyle that she acquired a real estate license in order to share the find with others like themselves. The old style realtors, they'd decided, didn't realize what they had.

I called Maureen that day. Sure, she said, she'd line up some homes to show us.

She went on a little breathlessly about the “media people” who were moving in, attracted by what she called Hoboken’s “funky” charms. One couple was converting an old church. Another newcomer would be opening a shop, “The Jeans Scene.” She made all this seem hip and happening, in keeping with the aspirations of the time.

In the next several weekends, with Maureen or with another of the younger realtors she passed us on to, we saw a dozen houses, at least from the outside. We didn’t bother to go inside a shabby redbrick on a block the agent himself said was flood prone. We whipped through just the parlor floor of one on downtown Hudson Street: a smelly, dark, cold-water former rooming house that had been stripped of mantles and partitioned off into a maze of cubicles with sinks in odd locations. The salesman rattled on about another client who had pulled up worn linoleum “just like this” and found good parquet floors; but I was sure this place would yield up only endless layers of grubbier linoleum.

There was one gem, for someone who could take it on. It belonged to a woman in her nineties who’d just been packed off to a nursing home after living her whole life in the same house. On the parlor floor, still filled with her parents’ Victorian furniture, every inch of wall and ceiling was ornately plastered, painted, gilded, or embossed. Archways were embellished overhead with intricate carved wooden lace, work the *Old-House Journal* would identify as fretwork, grilles, or spandrels, maybe all three. But even if you took to the decor you’d have a monster fixup job. Upstairs I walked across rain-damaged floors and looked up at blue sky through big holes in the roof and ceiling. Below on the kitchen level an old black coal stove stood on a bare dirt floor. How recently, I wondered, had the old lady cooked on that? Was she aware that the dirt floor was strewn with mouse droppings? Once outside and gulping air, I asked myself another question: Could it be that I was not cut out for brownstoning in Hoboken?

Then Maureen called with a new listing on a “good” uptown block. It was a good house too, with original wedding-cake plaster moldings and what the listing sheet described as excellent new mechanicals. Too good, it turned out. We looked, we gulped, we made an offer, then found another broker’s client had outbid us. Instead of being disappointed, though, I realized that I felt relieved. I still can’t say if it was cold feet about Hoboken or just doubts about my bonding with that ornate molding. Yet perversely, losing that one set us up for the next: the patched and peeling number next

door to the blond tree hater (I'll call her Rose), on a merely middling block on midtown Bloomfield Street.

Why did we go for this one? I heard no chiming bells or inner voices shouting "This is It." I think I was just tired of all the looking and deliberating. But the house was a wide one; we would stucco the façade a brownstone color; and the sellers hadn't been there long enough to muck up all the graceful nineteenth-century features. As for the mechanicals, we knew they would require some investment, but we didn't realize how much cash and fortitude we'd need.

Besides, Maureen had news: The city had a program that would help with the mechanicals. She took us to an agency called HIP, for Home Improvement Program, that could set us up with a federally guaranteed loan. (The guarantee was crucial, since banks had redlined the entire city and owners were abandoning their property as not worth keeping up.) Better yet, a federal subsidy reduced the interest on the loan to three percent from the prevailing twelve percent. And if perchance your grandmother died and left you just the right amount to pay for the improvements, you could go through the motions anyway, pay back the loan straight off, and still collect the interest differential, in a check for—well, in our case, seven thousand dollars. (Remember this was back when a spacious but neglected house like ours would sell for forty thousand, and all the work we had done came to less than twenty thousand.) Then, for an added sweetener, the improvement would be tax abated for five years. Thanks, Grandma and HIP.

I'd learn later that our little gift came from an anti-poverty program, called Model Cities, paid for with Great Society funding and open only to a chosen few especially needy cities. Hoboken was then so badly off that the Urban League in 1970 named it one of seven American cities that might well be past saving. So desperate that then-Mayor Louis de Pasquale took the unheard of step of hiring an unconnected out-of-towner, Michael Coleman, to administer the federally funded programs. By the time we got here Coleman had focused in on housing and launched three major programs: rehabbing strips of rundown buildings for low income tenants; converting an abandoned factory, where Keuffel and Esser had made Curly's slide rule among other now-quaint instruments for engineers, into subsidized apartments for "moderate" income renters; and, for homeowners, the HIP loans, a deal the city's longtime planner Ralph Seligman referred

to scornfully as “bait for brownstoners.” *Well, yes,* I thought when I heard that. *Someone has to pay those skyhigh taxes.*

Lord knows the city needed help. “It’s often said here,” Maureen told us, “that Hoboken never came out of the Depression.” That wasn’t just a flippant line. The 1970 census found the population disproportionately old and poor, the housing stock worse than that of any comparably sized city in the northeast, fourth worst in the entire nation. I remember when Rose, that dour sentinel next door, stood behind her gate and pointed to the houses on our block where families still lived without central heating or hot water. Tenants made their own heat with a system known as “gas on gas.” “It’s accurate,” Rose shrugged, meaning (I think) adequate. “Most Hoboken apartments get their heat that way. You only light the heat stove when you need it because you pay for it on your gas bill. When you see an apartment ad with ‘make own heat,’ that’s what it means.”

I began to understand why so many people in Hoboken seemed to nurse a bitter sense that they’d been left behind by the machines of progress.

Take the dockers. The first morning that I left for work from our new house I ran into clumps of middle-aged longshoremen on the downtown sidewalks near the piers. They were there the next day and again the next, some in the same wool plaid jackets—or dead ringers—that they’d worn in *On the Waterfront.* But I couldn’t fathom why so many were still congregating every morning, when I knew they hadn’t seen a day of work for years.

I got my answer when I overheard one of the men, weeks later, talking to a couple of young guys on a corner. “Seventeen thousand dollars a year,” he said, “but I have to be ready for work.” An old dockworker Curly drank with in a bar on Sixth Street confirmed that the longshoremen’s notorious union had done its rank and file some good after all: Their contract guaranteed that they’d be paid until retirement age as long as they kept showing up for work. No doubt a few guys cheated and went on to real work somewhere else, but most seemed to have nowhere to go beyond the sidewalk.

Harder cases, be they retired seamen or beached drifters, were already gathered at the nearby bars. These places never seemed to close. I had to swerve to miss drunks stumbling out the doors before I’d had my morning coffee. The rowdy Barbary Coast was

only legend now, but the blocks around the station still looked like a skid row for old men who had abandoned hope. They got their calories from cheap booze in downtown bars and slept in cheap single rooms upstairs. At any hour of the day or night you'd see a few of them outside the Victor Hotel on Hudson Place, sitting on the sidewalk with their backs against the building. When I walked past in the morning they seemed to feel obliged to summon up half-hearted macho calls like "hey, babe" or "lookin' for me?" It was all so feeble and perfunctory it would have been ridiculous to take offense, but after a few days I started to avoid that corner.

But other vestiges of former times were downright fetching. The first day that I stayed home from work to meet the plumber, I was watching for him from the stoop and saw the women gather on the corners, just as they had probably done for generations here and maybe centuries in their Italian villages. They were clustered at both ends of the block, small groups of middle-aged and older women all in black from kerchiefs to thick hose. Almost every day, I found in time, they came together on the sidewalk or in the middle of the street, exchanging news and gossip at great length although they never seemed to visit in each other's homes. Instead, they made the street a common parlor. The only spots of color in their standing circles were pairs of fuzzy light blue bedroom slippers mixed in among the practical black lace-up shoes.

Sometimes the bedroom slippers got as far as Washington, the main street—The Avenue, old-timers called it. I never saw the women standing in the street there, but they probably could have done so safely. Weekday traffic was so scarce then that you could cross routinely in mid block. On midtown Washington Street a block east of my house, bald mannequins and shelves of dusty shampoo bottles stood for years unnoticed in the windows of abandoned shops. Stores that were still open looked almost as dismal. Every day I passed a pile of washboards in the window of the hardware store a few blocks down the Avenue. At dress shops quaintly named Gay Mode, Dainty Cottons, Christina's Shoppy, and the oxymoronic Reliable Fashions, I poked through sidewalk racks of marked-down merchandise that seemed unlikely to lure customers inside.

Even the music that played up and down the Avenue came drifting from the past. You could walk from a dentist's waiting room (*I've got you*…) past Doc Izzo's appliance store (…*under my skin*) and on to pasta fazool at a working men's Italian lunch spot (*I've*

got you deep in the heart of me), then pay your parking fines at City Hall (*so deep in my heart* …) and head home past Lallo's House of Charles, a men's store named for its owner Charles Lallo (…*you're really a part of me*), and at all five spots, from radios or stereos or crude loudspeakers facing out onto the sidewalk, you'd hear the same voice, that of Hoboken's most famous son, singing songs that even then were decades old. Never mind that Frank Sinatra had got out of Hoboken by 1940, that he disowned his birthplace, told people that he came from Hasbrouck Heights. Hoboken hung on like a jilted lover. (*Use your mentality, wake up to reality.*) Half the population clung to frail one-time connections ("He sang at my husband's parents' wedding"), half griped that the star had turned his back on his old friends. It's true, The Voice could wrap around you, speaker scratch and all. I never claimed to be immune. But its pervasive presence was a little like a haunting.

Still, there were some spots of new life on the Avenue, with different music too. I'd never heard of movie videos before I bought a toaster at an Indian-run small appliance store that carried shelves of them from Bollywood. But most new shops I'm thinking of had signs in Spanish.

The one that stopped me cold was on a quiet block on uptown Washington Street, under a sign that read *Botanica.* At first I thought it had to be a plant store, but the items in the window weren't green and growing. There were candles, cheap plaster *santos* and better hand-carved wooden ones. Shelves of jars and bottles I supposed were herbs and potions. Behind all that a curtain hid whatever spooky rites I fancied must be going on inside. But what dropped my jaw was a sculpted hand displayed smack in the center of the window, up in front. It stood there on its wrist, palm facing out, confronting passers-by with what I recognized from Catholic school as Christ's stigmata: an ugly nail wound from the crucifixion in the palm and streaks of painted red blood dripping down. Stranger yet, the fingers were expertly carved to represent five human figures. Was this some kind of shop sign, like the striped pole outside a barber shop? Or did people really buy such items for their homes? It didn't occur to me when I stood there gaping that the crucifix my Irish Catholic mother kept above her bed might strike a lot of people as equally bizarre.

Later I would meet an Irish Catholic, or ex-Catholic, from Jersey City, who was

taking lessons from the Cuban Santeria priest, or briyo, at the *botannica*. “He sees the power in me,” Tommy told me. He also told me that the hand was called *Mano a Dios*, and that Santeria was a Cuban blend of Roman Catholic and African Yoruba practices. Through the years I would see other, dingier *botanicas* on side streets, but I never did stop marveling at that hand.

Another, dingier window intrigued me in a different way. It was downtown below the neon pig that marked the German butcher shop, and it was almost asking to be overlooked among the brighter windows crammed with car accessories or sexy lingerie or frilly party outfits *para los ninos*. But an old oak teacher’s desk was sitting there behind the glass, next to a hand-lettered cardboard sign, *muebles usadas.* For weeks I would glance over as I passed it on my way to work. Then I went by on a Saturday and found the block transformed into an indoor/outdoor market humming with transactions in at least five languages. (One of them, Maureen would tell me, was Serbo-Croatian, the tongue of Hoboken’s several hundred Yugoslavs.) People packed the sidewalks, munching street food, herding kids, and sorting through the inexpensive toys or caps or T-shirts piled up outside the stores. Crowds of kids around the tamarindo ice truck gave the scene a festive if not prosperous air.

In that atmosphere I couldn’t just walk by. I headed for what must have been the block’s one idle storefront—a moving company outlet, it turned out--and told a sleepy muscleman in jeans and work shirt that I had come to buy the desk. He didn’t seem to understand, but I was getting used to salespeople in Hoboken who couldn’t believe I wanted what they had to sell. Eventually he took my twenty-five dollars and promised free delivery after five.

“Now,” I told myself as I strolled home slurping tamarindo ice chips, “I can sit down and write about Hoboken.” That was over thirty years ago. But then, what would I have known to say at that point?

[Section 1 Elections]

It’s spring in 1977 and Hoboken is giddy with election fever. In other places where I’ve lived I didn’t vote for local officers or even know the Mayor’s name, but here I

can't escape the hoopla. About a week before the mayoral election I'm walking home at dinner time and passing rowhouse windows filled with campaign posters. Here and there a banner's stretched across the street above the wires, between the top floor windows of two facing houses. I'm not surprised that most signs and all the banners support the incumbent mayor Steve Cappiello. "My brother works for the city," a neighbor told me to explain her poster. And just the other day the Jersey Journal reported that two city hall directors had been fired for supporting the wrong guy.

But even people without jobs at stake are fixated on the contest. As I hit my block I marvel at the pitch of interest, especially after last fall's Presidential race went by almost unnoticed. Sure, the loyal Democrats would pull the lever for that guy from Georgia; but I'm learning it's the mayoral race here that turns out the dead.

Just as I reach my gate three little girls skip up and half-surround me, jumping up and down. They're shouting something like, "Cap yellero mono! Cap yellero mono!"

"What? What?" I shout back.

"Who you gonna vote for, Cappiello or Romano?"

I hate to tell them that I wouldn't vote for either one. But Cappiello, with his debonair swagger and his tight control of city government, seems the very model of a crafty old-style machine boss; and his rival, a former ally and a City Council member, shows no sign that he'd be better. So I stand there wondering what to say until the girls start jumping faster, more excited, shouting "Cappiello! Cappiello!" Then they scoot off as if they've suddenly gone shy.

A little later I go out for groceries and decide on impulse to stop in at both campaign headquarters, just a block or so away.

At Romano's storefront setup across Washington Street the only human in attendance is a fat guy snoozing at a table. "No one's here," he tells me.

"Well, are you minding the store for Councilman Romano?"

He half-nods a little nervously. I see he isn't up to a discussion so I ask if he has any campaign literature. "Flyers? Anything on why your guy should be elected?"

He holds up a square of crocheted yarn from a pile of such creations on the table. "Have a potholder," he says. I take it, though I think I'd burn my hand were I to use it, and cross the street to Cappiello's storefront.

Here there are two guys and two tables. On table one there's a cake and paper plates, and on the other paper cups and scotch and bourbon bottles.

"What can we do for you?" asks one of the men.

I tell them I'm a new Hoboken voter just trying to get some information.

"Have a piece of cake," he offers. Whether it's my gender or my outsider status, the booze appears off limits.

"No thanks. But tell me:" I rake my mind for some mundane issue that I might have read of in the Jersey Journal. Oh, yeah. "About the bids for garbage pickup…"

The first guy refers my question to the second, apparently a city worker, who is standing back against a wall. But he looks away. "That's not my department," he says.

I try again: "What about the school board issue?" (There's always a school board issue.) "Getting state Green Acres money for new parks?"

The first guy is getting irritated. "Are you from across the street?" he asks me.

On Saturday I see the same guy on the sidewalk out in front, handing out balloons and hot dogs while his candidates shake hands. Could it be that votes here come that cheap? Well, no, it turns out. The weekend handouts probably just help stir up excitement; the cash price will be doled out as needed on election day. It's called street money and it's legal if you say it's not for voting but for helping to get out the vote. Never mind that "workers" can't collect their chits until they've voted.

Progress comes slowly. Next time around a City Council candidate for my ward will reach out to mature voters: Instead of hot dogs and balloons he'll offer free blood pressure readings.

The first time I do go out to vote here I'm exiting the voting booth as a middle-aged man, one of those affable-looking guys who hang around outside the polls with palm cards, is steering an old woman into the polling place. He's got her by the elbow and she is shuffling across the floor in her house slippers, wearing such a blank expression I don't think she knows where she is, let alone why He guides her to the voting booth, gives her a little shove inside, ad then when she just stands there with the curtain open he points over her shoulder to the lever I assume is for his candidate and says gently, "Pull the lever, Mary, pull the lever." I turn open-mouthed to the poll workers,

but they're all just smiling fondly as if poor bewildered Mary were somehow cute. "It's all right," one of them tells me. "She needs help."

[Section 3] What We Talked About

A few years after we moved to Hoboken, the New Yorker ran a piece about a rundown Brooklyn neighborhood, newly renamed Boerum Hill, where modestly off middle class couples were buying and restoring brownstones with a consuming sense of pioneering mission. One of the renovators quoted in the article described the conversation at their parties, where people who had once discussed more weighty matters--"religion, politics, the arts"--now spent entire evenings swapping tales of roof repairs and names of favorite plumbers or arguing vehemently about how to restore old floors.

We too had once indulged in fervent conversations about life and art and especially politics, a subject we approached before our Hoboken immersion as material for debates on moral principles. (*Does the end ever justify the means? Is true communism attainable? What are we doing in Vietnam?*) We too were now exchanging plumbers' phone numbers, advice on stripping paint from fancy moldings, and the name of Jersey City's busiest exterminator, *La Bomba Atomica.* In encounters on the street and at the hardware store, I listened to sad tales about burst pipes, collapsing ceilings, contractors who absconded without finishing their jobs. I matched them with reports on swarming termites, tap water that came out in rusty trickles, dead rats in the toilet bowl, plaster dust in the granola.

But mostly, when I ran into other newcomers to Hoboken, what we talked about was Hoboken. Brownstoning miseries weren't our only common trials. But even our complaints were half amused, edged with a sort of self-congratulation as if some shared superior sensibility had driven all of us to such a quaintly trying town.

Wherever any of us hailed from, we seemed to find some semblance of our distant homes in Hoboken.

“I can’t put my finger on it,” a would-be author from Rhode Island told me as we walked on River Street, “but Hoboken has the *very feel* of Providence. If I can nail that, I can write my novel.” (I guess she couldn’t, for she didn’t.)

Another time I sat in a dim bar and listened to a self-described misfit from Buffalo boast that he was “getting in with” a political clique made up of b-and-r’s the term for people born and raised in Hoboken. “The same tough guys,” he gloated, “who beat me up when we were kids.”

A physicist from Holland said he had moved to Hoboken because it was the first “real-life European city” he’d found in America. And one dizzy summer night an activist friend from Iowa stood on the sidewalk under a full moon, flung up her arms, and called out, “My connection to this place is umbilical!”

On looking back I think what we responded to in Hoboken was less a mirror of those other places than an echo of an earlier time, before mainstream America was scattered in suburbia and airbrushed by postwar prosperity. Whatever it was, we took an odd possessive satisfaction in reminders of the stifling small towns and shabby urban neighborhoods we’d been hell-bent to grow up and get out of. Yet at the same time the place beguiled us like a quirky foreign village.

The food shopping was from another time and several other places. There wasn't a bagel to be had in the entire city, much less a croissant or a wedge of brie—and this was at a time when every party or reception was a "wine and cheese" event, with brie the status cheese that made the platter. But we could buy miraculous Italian bread at two a.m., straight from the old-style bakery's brick oven; and dozens of Italian corner delis turned out runny fresh mozzarella not just every day but all day long. Our coffee beans were roasted as we waited at the importer's Hoboken warehouse. I learned to cook with ever more exotic spices from the corner Indian grocery a few steps from our front door. Across the street on the same corner a Cuban bodega displayed plantains and cilantro and a baffling variety of hairy roots. The produce truck that parked on the next corner did a brisker business in the numbers than in broccoli and eggplant, or so I was told by a nun who gets around. But the tripe man was the real thing. Every week he hit our street calling trippa, trippa, and women ran out in scuffs and housedresses clutching crumpled dollar bills.

I never quite felt up to cleaning tripe, and every year at Christmas time I vowed to try Picannini's marinated whole eel next year. But I stood in lines an hour long for my holiday pastiera di grana (a ricotta-wheatberry pie) and braved the stench of a live poultry market for my Thanksgiving turkey. The tiny poultry place was crammed with chicken, turkeys, guinea hens, and rabbits stacked in cages. You pointed to the bird (or beast) you wanted; a woman in a bloody apron grabbed it, stabbed it in the jugular, stripped off the feathers in a fast low-tech machine, and gave it to you warm to carry home.

Most newcomers steered clear of the live poultry markets, but they couldn't avoid the more pervasive smells of Hoboken. There were jokes and feeble protests about burnt-coffee breezes from the Maxwell House plant —the least of our air pollutants, in my view. But no one joked about crossing the street-corner sewer grates in summer. You just walked fast and held your breath. When Frank Sinatra called his old hometown a sewer, he wasn't being flip.

Brownstoners could spend hours talking up the priceless features of their bargain nineteenth-century homes. Ours has marble mantles, etched-glass pocket doors, arched windows nine feet high. But to reach it you had to navigate a flood-prone corner where the sewer overflowed with every heavy rain, then walk past three vacant buildings on our block alone, and pick your way along a sidewalk clogged with papers, broken glass, spilled garbage, rain-soaked cardboard cartons, and the droppings of the feral dogs that ran in packs through town.

Overhead the sky was striped with wires, phone lines, and TV cables that would be hidden underground in any middle-class community. The one uplifting note in all this tangled mess of black spaghetti was provided by the kids who by long custom tied their outgrown sneakers into pairs and tossed them up onto the wires. At one corner, Seventh and Park, the unofficial Sneaker Central, dozens of pairs might swing for months or longer until some sourpuss new to town complained enough to have them all removed.

Even New Yorkers were appalled by all the mess and litter. One brownstone-hunting couple that I knew through work took one short walk in Hoboken and headed back to the PATH train whispering of "eyesores high and low." But the locals seemed inured. When we first came with the realtor to see our house, we had to step around a

ripped, stained mattress on the sidewalk up the street. When we moved in four months later the mattress was still there.

What most distressed newcomers, though, was the local tolerance for noise. On weekend mornings city workers began drilling in the streets at seven, not long after the last stragglers tumbled from the corner bars. A friend who lived a few blocks west of me was wakened earlier by roosters in his neighbors' yards. On my block lines of drivers rested on their horns whenever cars or taxis stopped for pickups on the narrow nineteenth-century street. Loudspeaker trucks drove up and down throughout the city, broadcasting scratchy warnings when Diesel fuel spilled into the drinking water or some other mess-up threatened public safety. The trucks were kind of quaint, admittedly. But since the same vehicles went round with other messages before elections, it was sometimes hard to know if they were saying "Vote for McLaughlin" or "Don't drink the water."

Everyone who spent a night in Hoboken was jolted by the growling, grinding garbage trucks that came through six nights a week, first around two a.m. to pick up on one side of the street, then an hour or two later for the other side. Once a friend called to complain to City Hall and got a weary-sounding Public Works dispatcher on the phone. The man asked my friend's address and promised, "We'll tell them to go quiet past your house."

Bill hung up and asked a neighbor, "How do you deal with these guys?"

"You have to go through your councilman," the neighbor told him. So Bill wrote to his councilman. No answer.

"Don't write, go see him," the neighbor admonished.

Why? He wouldn't say.

Bill's first thought was that it took a bribe to get a hearing. In fact most city officials simply didn't answer anyone they didn't know, usually from childhood, and this particular councilman couldn't read or write a letter anyway. He was illiterate. But Bill didn't know that at the time, and he was not about to take off work for so unpromising a cause. So the trucks never did go quiet past his house or anyone's. The only change to date is that now they only come through once a night.

After a few weeks in Hoboken most of us could filter out the garbage noises or fall back to sleep as soon as the trucks went by. But then came summer and the feast bombs. From morning until dark for three or seven or nine-day stretches through the summer, Hoboken sounded like a war zone. Our dog was quaking under beds. I feared for all our ear drums. Finally I asked the couple at the corner salumeria, "Why don't the police get after those damn kids?" They exchanged an anguished look. That's when I learned that the nerve-shattering mortar blasts were set not by lawless kids but by church-going men in suits. Men authorized by their Italian clubs and parishes to help celebrate the feast days of the patron saints of their ancestral villages back in Italy.

You have to understand.

These annual feasts--part fundraising street fair, part spiritual blowout--aren't just a Hoboken tradition. They've been going on in Italy since the early Christian centuries and in America since the late 1800s. The sound effects go way back, too. What Hoboken calls "feast bombs" have topped off special Church occasions, such as local feasts and solemn Masses, since gunpowder came to Italy about six hundred years ago. New York has always banned the bombs, or so the priest at Little Italy's San Gennaro feast informed me, but New Jersey feasts preserve the whole tradition. And the different groups that sponsored Hoboken's felt deeply that the resounding booms were an inseparable part of the devotions. Not only did the blasts rev up the festive atmosphere outdoors, where thousands of celebrants squeezed their way from clam bar to sausage stand or stood in roped-off lines for zeppole deep-fried on site by parish women. The explosions also brought a solemn resonance to the heady blend of bells and candle flames and incense that enrich the ritual inside the church. Maybe most important, they heralded the closing-day procession, when the statue of the feted saint was carried through the streets, dripping jewelry and the tears of the devoted who had bent to kiss it as it left the church. When I heard the booms and the parade bands coming up my street, I knew it was time to go out onto the stoop and watch the saint go by.

Since Hoboken's Italians came in force from several different villages, each with its own saint and saint's day, the whole bombastic sequence was repeated several times throughout the summer. Not all communities that carry on the old traditions are so fractured. Some years ago I read, again in the *New Yorker,* about the *giglio* in Italian

Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where different parishes have joined by now in one expansive feast and staggering procession. Such unity would be unthinkable in Hoboken. I once heard a man from Bari dismiss a candidate for city council with the words "Aw, he's a Mulfi"—meaning, I was told, that the candidate or his parents came from Molfetta, just a few miles from the disparager's own village. One year a major feast was almost cancelled because the men were battling the women for the right to bear the statue through the streets. Did I say this is a contentious town?

Still, the sons and daughters of the different old-world villages are Americans now as well. And what that meant in the heyday of the bombings was one more booming summer holiday. Starting around July first and building to the Fourth, the local patriots saluted Independence Day with scattered bursts of wildcat bombings and a steady pop pop pop from kids with caps and fireworks.

With all this celebration raging in a season when we kept our windows open front and back, we couldn't count on many restful weekends. But then, I never did expect to find serenity in Hoboken. Whatever I was looking for, the feast bombs--unmuzzled by gentility, still rocking heaven after six hundred years—suggested that I'd landed in a likely spot.